

Fordham Footsteps: A Conversation With John Scott, FCRH '12

Matt :

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from student life to their current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors, and others will describe why they took some unexpected turns.

Sara :

Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories of our esteemed alumni. I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives.

Matt :

And I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement. And with us today is John Scott, Fordham College Rose Hill, class of 2012 and a double major in political science and environmental policy. Hey John.

John :

Hey guys. How's it going?

Sara :

Welcome.

John :

Thank you. How's it going?

Sara :

Great, thanks. So you're a wild animal keeper at the New York Aquarium.

John :

Yeah.

Sara :

Tell us a little bit about that.

John :

Yeah, so I went to Fordham a very, very long time ago it seems, but I got a degree in political science and environmental studies... Or, it was environmental policy at the time, but they've changed it since.

John :

And yeah, I work at the New York Aquarium as a wild animal keeper. I've always really loved animals. It's

been like a passion of mine since I was a really young kid, and it was something that I knew going into Fordham that I was interested in. So I was strategically kind of playing out my internships and also my course of studies and laying it out so that after graduation I could kind of line up jobs that I was interested in.

John :

My current job, I work with marine mammals and penguins, so it's very small animals all the way up to like 900 pound male sea lions. So we run the gamut of different sizes. But my day is a lot of training, a lot of feeding our animals, a lot of guest interaction. So it's really great. Fordham I think really provided a great framework and a great foundation for my current job because Fordham kind of inspires their students to think about issues from all different sides and all different perspectives. And I think that's been really helpful in my current job, because you never really know what the day is going to like turn out to be like. So it definitely was really helpful going to Fordham.

Matt :

So how did you land on that major?

John :

How did I land on-

Matt :

Those majors?

John :

Yeah, it was a great, great question, and it was a question I really struggled with the first couple of years at Fordham, and I was very lucky and very appreciative of the core curriculum because it gave me a little bit of time to kind of figure it out. But I knew I loved animals my entire life. I grew up in Connecticut in Bridgeport and Trumbull, and I grew up right down the street from a zoo and I went to camp there year after year after year. And then I volunteered there and worked there when I was in high school.

John :

So I've always really loved animals, but I also really loved politics, and it was something that I found really fascinating, and I love debating politics and watching the news and just really keeping on top of it. So I came to Florida and I knew that I really loved animals and loved working with animals, but I also had this really deep interest in politics, and I went back and forth, back and forth, and I was able to organize my coursework that I could do both. So that's kind of how I landed on both of those.

John :

Math and physics has never really been my strong suit. So environmental policy, environmental studies really helps me because I didn't necessarily have to take some of the classes in the... go into that realm that I wasn't super comfortable with. But I still was able to take all the biology classes that I wanted to.

Sara :

And you did dabble in campaigns a bit.

John :

Yeah. Yeah. I actually, when I was in high school, I worked for local political campaigns in Connecticut. And then when I was at Fordham I worked for the Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs, which sets up humanitarian training courses for humanitarian aid workers all over the world. So I was an intern there for about a year, and that was kind of my foray into international relations and international politics before swinging back to to the animal world. But yeah, I definitely did kind of go down the road of politics for a little bit and then realized that my passion and what gets me up in the morning is working with animals.

Matt :

And when did you realize that?

John :

I realized that... That's a great question. I realized that probably at Fordham. There were several moments. I interned at the Bronx Zoo when we were at Fordham and I interned in the bird department, I also interned in the mammal department, and working alongside gorillas and elephants and even smaller bird species, it was just this moment of like, this is it, this is what really inspires me. Saving these animals and wildlife conservation is to the core something that I'm really passionate about. And I think it was at Fordham in my internships that I was like, hmm, this is really what I want to do for the rest of my life.

Sara :

You even did a little bit of marketing too it sounds like. You have some web design background and you've done some marketing for different organizations. Tell me a little bit about that.

John :

So when I was at Fordham, I was trying to get my foot in the door at the Bronx Zoo, so I had worked at a smaller zoo in Connecticut trying to get my foot in the door at the Bronx, and at the time I didn't have a lot of network connections with the Bronx, with WCS as a whole, and they were looking for interns in their marketing department, so that was like aha, this is my foot in the door.

John :

So I started, I was an intern in marketing and that's how I got my start with WCS in 2009, is when I was an intern with them. And again, I think it was really helpful, and it's helped me later in my career because we can start these new programs like I'm doing now at the aquarium, and it allows me to have the tools and the skills to market effectively and market these programs and promote them effectively because I was an intern in marketing.

Sara :

And then is that how the zoo industry works, you would go into a smaller zoo and then hope to get seen by a larger zoo? Is that sort of the stepping stone?

John :

It's a great question. Usually what you'll do is you'll start at a smaller institution than swing over to a bigger institution and then rise up as much as you can at the bigger institution and then swing back to a smaller institution-

Sara :

At a higher level.

John :

At a higher level, at a better job. And then you'll swing back to a big institution. So you're constantly bouncing back and forth between smaller institutions that gets you a wide array of experience and you get to do a lot of different things because there's not a lot of staff and you kind of have to, and then you go to a bigger institution for the name and then you swing back to kind of work your way up the ladder.

Matt :

So where are you in that process?

John :

That is the million dollar question. I have a really good idea of what I would like to do, and I love working for WCS. I think what they do is incredible in terms of global conservation and also just here other zoos and aquariums. They manage four zoos and the New York Aquarium here in New York city. So it's a massive organization that has an incredible amount of reach.

John :

And right now I'm just kind of figuring out the best way up that ladder in the WCS system to kind of reach my eventual goals.

Sara :

When did you realize that you needed to get the advanced degree in biology?

John :

Yeah, so I realized that I had to get my master's pretty early on. WCS as a whole, a lot of their curatorial staff, so their curators, their directors, their upper level managers have advanced degrees. The vast majority of them have their masters and a good amount of them have their PhDs. So in order to rise up to the point that I want to rise up to, it was kind of a necessary tool to get my foot in the door for those type of jobs.

Sara :

Do you think you'll need to get your PhD at some point too?

John :

That's another really good question. You know, I'm debating. I'm debating about, I'm definitely going to go back for a second master's, more I think psychology based and a little less biology based, but I've

been debating about getting my PhD and going back, but I think that's a couple of years down the road. You know, take a few years off-

Sara :

We'll have you back on and talk about that.

John :

Exactly.

Matt :

So John, I'd love to ask you more about your current work. First, I was curious if you could walk us through your journey. In those years since you graduated, what are those kinds of roles you've had?

John :

Yeah, so I graduated from Fordham in 2012. I think it was May 19th, 2012, and then six days later I moved down to Florida and I worked for a central Florida theme park that is run by a mouse, wink, wink. So I worked for a third party company called Natural Encounters, and Natural Encounters does free flight bird shows all over the country. So zoos and aquariums will contract out to any NEI, for short, contract out to NEI to set up these shows that have a really strong conservation message and they're featuring all natural behaviors. So things that you would see in the wild or things that you would see these birds doing in these shows.

John :

Our home base was outside of Orlando, and I worked for NEI ,for little less than six years and I set up shows all over the country. So I started in Florida at our show at that theme park. And then I went to Dallas Zoo for about two years, and I was a part of a team. Dallas Zoo actually was in the midst of transitioning to doing the show themselves. So I was a part of this transitional team that was turning the show over to Dallas Zoo itself. After that, I went back to Florida for a little while and then I went to Brookfield Zoo in Chicago where I lived. I loved living in Chicago. And Brookfield Zoo's an amazing institution. I went to Memphis Zoo after that to kind of wrap up a show that they needed a little bit of help with. And then I was in Florida for another about two years.

John :

But I think I wanted to come a little bit closer to home. New York has always felt like home, even from back in undergrad days. It just, it felt like home. So I came back, I worked for Central Park Zoo for a little less than two years where I worked with a wide variety. Central Park is an amazing facility in that you get a lot of experience with a large range of animals, anywhere from tiny little songbirds all the way up to grizzly bears if you're lucky. So it was a really great experience. But working there, I really, really loved working with our marine mammals and our penguins. So a job opened up at the aquarium and they were looking for somebody to come in to start this penguin encounter program so guests can come to the aquarium and meet these animals up close and personal.

John :

It's a half hour program and they were looking for somebody that had a lot of animal experience, but

also a lot of experience setting up programs, setting up shows, and interacting with guests. So that's post Fordham kind of what my career path has been like.

Sara :

And during your college search, how did you land on Fordham knowing that these were the areas you wanted to get into?

John :

Yeah, it's a great question. I loved the, honestly, the core curriculum. I loved the fact that I had a little bit of a buffer to kind of figure out exactly what I wanted to do. I also loved just the going... It's hard to describe, but just going on a visit to Fordham when I was 16/17 it just, it felt like home and it really, it just felt, like I went on all of these different college tours. I think we went on like 10 or 15 college tours. Lots of colleges, very little time. And Fordham was the one that felt like home. I loved what they stood for. I loved that it was care for the whole person. And it just, it felt right.

Sara :

And how do you integrate that mentality into the work that you do today?

John :

For sure. I think working in wildlife conservation and being a wild animal keeper, I think sometimes animal people tend to focus on the day to day specifics of taking care of these animals, which is incredibly important and our day wouldn't function without that focus. But I think sometimes the bigger picture gets lost, or not even necessarily lost, but it gets a little fuzzier. And I think going to Fordham, it gave me a sense of a bigger picture out there, and it gave me the sense of like, okay, like this is my scope, but let's broaden it just a little bit to get a greater sense of the issue of conservation and habitat destruction and extinction as a whole.

John :

And I think I'm able to approach it in a lot of different ways, and I think I have Fordham to thank for that. But I didn't go to Fordham and specialize from the minute that I stepped on Fordham's campus, I was able to dabble and learn about a lot of different things, whether it was economics or urbanism was one of the classes that I took. I took French, I took business, took a little bit of everything, and I think that gives me a greater sense of the bigger picture, and I think that bigger picture is what's actually going to save species in the long run.

Matt :

How about your extracurricular involvement? You were involved in quite a few groups. Peer Eds, RHA, the list goes on.

John :

Yeah. I think the more things change, the more they stay the same. I like to be involved at Fordham. I was in a lot of different extracurricular activities, and I think that's carried on after graduation. We have a zoo keeping organization, AAZK, or the American Association of Zookeepers, and it's a national and international organization, and it's a professional organization for people that are zookeepers, animal

trainers that are in the animal field, and there's different chapters. So each big city or each big zoo or a zoological institution has their own chapter. So I'm on the board for ours in New York City. I'm the executive secretary and it looks like that I'm going to be running for president of this organization for next year.

Sara :
Good luck.

John :
Thank you. Yeah, so-

Matt :
John, are you announcing your campaign here?

John :
This is the inside scoop for you guys.

John :
So yeah, it kind of continues. And these professional organizations, there's a few. There's IAATE or the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators. There's AZA, which is the American Zoo and Aquarium Association. All of these big zoological organizations that are outside of my day to day scope that I'm still really involved in. I was involved in when I was an undergrad. They had like student memberships that you could get into. And then I've just continued that in my professional life.

Sara :
And nice to have a network of people who are like-minded and doing similar work that will maybe help you find a new direction in the future.

John :
For sure. What's the expression? Good artists copy, great artists steal. And I think that's very true of the zoo and aquarium industry. As we'll see, ideas from other facilities are like, hey, that's a really good idea. How can we steal that and tailor it to our animals? And I think there's a lot of that and that's what this network of zoo and aquarium professionals does for the most part. It's like, oh, I like that idea. I'll bring it back to bring it back to New York.

Matt :
You think about the number of different programs and events you put on as a student, and you had to develop a student leader, and it's introducing some of the parallels.

John :
Again, the more things change, the more they stay the same. So yeah, as a part of AAZK in New York City, we're constantly running events. So we have several big events during the course of the year to raise money for different conservation initiatives. We have Pints for Penguins every winter and we raised I think \$1,300 last year in one night for African Penguin conservation. We had a Pride event and

we split half of the money for LGBT scientists and the other half was for lions. So we had a little play on word. We did that in June.

John :

We have Croctoberfest every October. We just had that a couple of weeks ago. That raises money for this endangered species of crocodilian. So the event planning continues even though I've graduated Fordham.

John :

Yeah, so we're developing this new program at the aquarium is penguin encounter program and it's a lot of the same. It's a lot, you know, generating interest, generating buzz, having good guest interaction, making sure people are enjoying themselves. Also networking and reaching out to other people within WCS and within our organization. And as a little plug, if you guys are interested in listening, if you go to NYAquarium.com and you click on Wild Encounters, you can find all the information about our program. But yeah, it's funny. Fordham really well prepared me for my career.

Sara :

Did you have a mentor when you were a student or do you have one now that's been helpful?

John :

Yeah, I have actually a couple of mentors. As a student I had several mentors in the industry itself. I had people that I worked at the Bronx Zoo with and at Beardsley Zoo up in Connecticut that I'm still very close to and are still really trusted mentors in my life, I think. So I'm getting my masters in biology through Miami University in Ohio and it's an online program, but in the summer we traveled to one of 15 different countries to do field work. So I just went to Kenya this past summer. I got back a few months ago, which was amazing, but one of my professors just got her doctorate at what my master's thesis is in. She works for Disney. She's their conservation programs manager, and she's been a really helpful resource in the past six months to kind of figure out my six month plan, my year plan, my three, five, 10 year plan for my career and just working and chipping away at that slowly.

Sara :

Are you able to share the topic of your thesis?

John :

Yeah, so my thesis is on the role of zoos and aquariums in conservation and more specifically the best way that we can tailor the programming that we have at zoos and aquariums to inspire conservation action. So every year I've done research at different facilities on their programs, whether it's a show, a feed, these park counters, so these informal 15 minute, more or less keeper chats with an animal and seeing what impact that has on guests. If we tailor the content of these things, are people leaving more connected to the animals that are featured? Are they leaving more knowledgeable about these species? And in turn, are they more inspired to go home and change their conservation behavior? Are they more likely to not use a plastic bag, not use a plastic straw? Are they more likely to donate to a conservation organization and seeing how best we can inspire the guests that come to zoos and aquariums to go out and make a huge difference for animals.

John :

Because if you think about it, more people visit zoos and aquariums in a given year than all sporting events combined.

Sara :

Really?

John :

Yeah.

Matt :

Wouldn't have guessed. Wow.

John :

Yeah. It's really, really impressive, the amount of guests that come in to zoos and aquariums, so the potential to influence the field of wildlife conservation and really have a dramatic impact in the lives of these animals in the wild I think is something that I'm passionate about. And I think something that we as an institution and also a zoo and aquarium field need to be really conscious of, of what we're putting out into the world and how best we can inspire that conservation action.

Matt :

So John, you talked about policy a little bit there. Do you think politics is, again, in your future in some way?

John :

You know, I never say never. I never like to close the door.

John :

I think from my career as a whole, I would like to be, for WCS in charge of their on grounds programming, so we don't really have this position right now. We have several people that have pieces of this, but a lot of large zoos and aquariums have somebody that's in charge of the programming. So the shows, the keeper talks, the encounter experiences on grounds there. That person's also in charge of training these animals, they're in charge of the content, they're in charge of managing staff, and I think as I get older and more established in the field, that's something that I feel like I'm working towards and something that I really want.

John :

When I was growing up and even when I was at Fordham, I was always kind of thinking that I wanted to be the director of a facility, and being the director of a zoo, like the Bronx Zoo or San Diego Zoo or Disney involves a lot of politics and involves a lot of policy. It involves wearing a lot of different hats and I think again going back to Fordham really well prepared me for that.

John :

But as I get a little bit older, I think maybe, maybe not that route. Maybe a step or two down the ladder, perhaps. Maybe not the top of the ladder, but we'll see. Like I said, I never like to close a door.

Sara :

What advice do you have for political science majors or environmental studies majors who maybe want to follow in your footsteps? What would you tell them?

John :

A couple of things. I had a mentor a long time ago give me a few pieces of advice. He said, always raise your hand, and he made a point and I think this has really helped me in my career of just ask. You're never going to get anything in your career unless you ask. Also recognize forks in the road. You don't really need to know which fork you're going to go down, but just recognize that you're at a point in your career or your life where there's a choice that you can make.

John :

And I think going off of that, recognizing that nobody has it all figured out. We're all kind of in this together. I think when I was younger I thought that I had to have it figured out by a certain point, that if I majored in this then I would do this and it would be really easy and like a really well-planned out chess match. As an adult I realize it's like a chess match in a tornado, that we're trying to figure it out the best that we can and it's okay not to know.

John :

And then I think something that I've really tried to do in my career and his last point of advice was make yourself invaluable. If you're a keeper, learn how to flip burgers at the cafe, learn how to manage the books, learn how to do PR, learn as much as you can and make yourself invaluable so that when an opportunity does arise, you're a little bit more suited for that opportunity.

John :

And I think for specifically Fordham students, I think Fordham, at least for me, really inspired me and I remember leaving Fordham ready to hit my career and like make a huge difference. And I think that sense of ambition sometimes plays well in certain fields and maybe necessarily doesn't play well in others, but I think it's important to recognize that ambition is a good thing. And ambition is believing in yourself and believing in your abilities and your ability to go out and change whatever field you're leaving Fordham to go into. I think ambition is going forth and setting the world on fire.

Sara :

Well, that's all we have.

Matt :

John, thanks so much for being here.

Sara :

Thanks. This was wonderful.

John :

Thank you guys.

Matt :

Well, that's another edition of Fordham Footsteps. Fordham Footsteps was brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association.

Sara :

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